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New York Times

Israeli Diplomat Michael Oren Is Man in Middle - NYTimes.com

WASHINGTON — With Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel engaged in an unusually public dispute with the Obama administration over Iran, Mr. Netanyahu's man in Washington, Michael B. Oren, has been working rooms all over town.

He has run up to Capitol Hill for damage control. He has spent hours with reporters making Israel's case against Tehran. He went to a Rosh Hashana party celebrating the Jewish New Year at Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s house. He had the White House chief of staff and hundreds of others over for Rosh Hashana at his own house. He went to a ribbon-cutting ceremony in Maryland to open the North American headquarters of an Israeli military contractor. He even made a quiet trip to press his arguments about Iran at J Street, the dovish Jewish lobbying group.

Much of it was the crisis management and daily business conducted by any Israeli ambassador to the United States, who always finds an open door in Washington. But with the New Jersey-born-and-bred Mr. Oren, there is a difference: He is representing a prime minister who has infuriated the White House.

"He's in a very tough spot because his job is to maintain open communications between two administrations that have staked out positions that are adversarial and yet they can't admit that they're adversarial," said David J. Rothkopf, the chief

executive of the Foreign Policy Group and a roommate of Mr. Oren in graduate school who remains a good friend.

“This is not the easiest time in history to be the Israeli ambassador to the United States,” said another friend, Jeffrey Goldberg, who closely follows relations between Jerusalem and Washington as a national correspondent for The Atlantic magazine.

Friends say that the polished and telegenic Mr. Oren is frustrated, although he keeps up a diplomatic front. Asked last week if he was having a tough day after Mr. Netanyahu harshly criticized the Obama administration for refusing to set “red lines” on Iran’s nuclear progress that would trigger an American military strike, Mr. Oren replied, zombie-like, “Oh, no.”

He was sitting still for five minutes at his desk at the heavily guarded Israeli Embassy, his face a mask. “You want to know a tough day?” Mr. Oren said. “There are days when rockets are falling on a southern Israeli city. There are days when you’re worried about unconventional weaponry getting into the wrong hands, when hundreds of lives are at stake.”

Friends say that although Mr. Oren may wish that Mr. Netanyahu used more tact, he is in sync with the prime minister’s alarms about Iran.

“We’ve waited while they’ve declared their intention to destroy us, pretty much every day,” Mr. Oren said during an interview in a sitting room at his official residence, a modern home tucked away in an expensive, verdant section of Northwest Washington. “That’s waiting a very long time.”

He pointed to pictures of his three children, including a years-old photograph of his wife, Sally, with their youngest, now on active duty in the Israeli Defense Forces. “That little boy with his mother — there is my infantry officer now,” Mr. Oren said. “I’ve got these kids — their lives are on the line. The last thing we want is war. Part of our responsibility is seeking to avoid war. And if we can avoid war by raising international consciousness about the nature of the Iranian threat, then we’re fulfilling our responsibility.”

The nub of the tension between the United States and Israel is time: Mr. Netanyahu believes that the Iranians are so close to making a nuclear bomb that Israel soon will not be able to stop it, but the United States, with superior military capabilities,

argues that it will be able to detect, and prevent, Iran from passing that point. Israel in turn says it cannot outsource its national security, even to an ally like the United States. Iran says its nuclear program is peaceful.

Like most Israeli ambassadors before him, Mr. Oren does not make policy, negotiate or carry vital messages between the two sides — the last a superfluous job when the traffic between the two administrations remains so intense. If Ehud Barak, the Israeli defense minister, needs to speak to the Obama administration, he picks up the phone and calls Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Thomas E. Donilon, the national security adviser. Or President Obama simply phones Mr. Netanyahu, as he did last week to try to calm the situation after the prime minister's comments about red lines.

And Mr. Netanyahu has no problem communicating directly to the American public, as he demonstrated over the weekend by appearing on the NBC News program "Meet the Press" and CNN's "State of the Union" to reiterate his warning that Iran is close to being able to produce a bomb.

Mr. Oren's role is to shape and push Mr. Netanyahu's point of view in Washington. As difficult as that is, he has the résumé to try. Raised in a conservative Jewish family in West Orange, N.J., Mr. Oren worked on a kibbutz at 15, was educated at Princeton and Columbia, immigrated to Israel and spent multiple tours in the Israeli Army, including a job as spokesman during an infamous low point for the military, its poor performance in the 2006 war in Lebanon. Along the way he wrote two highly regarded histories, one on the 1967 war, another on America's turbulent 230-year relationship with the Middle East. He was appointed ambassador three years ago, giving up his American citizenship to do it.

Mr. Oren is unique among previous Israeli envoys in that he speaks American English, appears with fluency and frequency on television and writes dozens of op-ed articles for The New York Times and other newspapers. At the same time, Mr. Oren courts a wide network of reporters and columnists and speaks regularly to universities and Jewish groups, including now J Street, after he initially turned down an invitation to speak to them.

"I give him credit for coming to engage," said J Street's president, Jeremy Ben-Ami, whose group agrees with Mr. Oren that Iran is a threat but not that it is time to set a deadline.

People in Israel say Mr. Oren is in regular contact with Mr. Netanyahu, but generally on the subject of what to say and not to say in Washington. “He’s a very good analyst, but I don’t think he’s a player on telling Bibi not to bomb Iran,” said Aluf Benn, the editor of the left-leaning Israeli newspaper Haaretz.

Asked the $100,000 question in Washington — whether Mr. Netanyahu is bluffing or will order an Israeli strike on Iran this fall — Mr. Oren replied, “I’m out of the loop on that.”

But he is enough in the loop to say that an article earlier this month in Haaretz — which characterized Mr. Barak as now against an Israeli strike on Iran — was all wrong. “I read the interview that supposedly he was backtracking, I didn’t see backtracking at all, and he has denied it to me,” Mr. Oren said, referring to a recent conversation with Mr. Barak.

Mr. Oren, 57, was also in the room in Israel last month when Mr. Netanyahu, according to Representative Mike Rogers, Republican of Michigan, dressed down the American ambassador, Daniel B. Shapiro. Mr. Rogers, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, was in the meeting and told WJR, a Michigan radio station, that there was a “very sharp exchange” between Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Shapiro.

It was, he said, “very, very clear the Israelis had lost their patience with the administration” over Iran.

Not so, Mr. Oren said.

“Dan did not shout anything,” Mr. Oren said. “He presented the Obama administration’s position — compellingly, O.K.? The prime minister conveyed Israel’s position — compellingly. I found it refreshing, the whole thing. It didn’t shock me at all. But that’s me. Listen, I’m a veteran of a lot of this stuff.”

He smiled, and joked about how his time as Israel’s ambassador to Washington at this fraught moment in history may have aged him.

“I’m only like 32 years old,” he said, “and look like this after three years.”